

## Yes, It's a Choice

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I love speaking on Pride Day because I can give my sermons provocative titles. Some of you may remember last year's sermon, *The Kingdom of God is Queer*. This year, I want to be provocative in a different way. Today's sermon is called, *Yes, It's a Choice*. And if you don't think the idea that homosexuality is a choice is provocative, you obviously weren't listening when the house band performed Lady Gaga's song "Born This Way" at our last gig. The whole point of the song, and I'm sure no one else is analyzing Lady Gaga in a church in Colorado Springs today, is that strength, pride, and a sense of beauty come from the confidence of knowing that "you're on the right track, baby, you were born this way."

But what if you weren't born this way? What if none of us were born this way? What is Pride Day about in that case? And what does it have to do with the heterosexually-identified, which defines most people in this room?

Pride Day, as I see it, is all about choice. Not because who you are attracted to or who I am attracted to is a choice. How we feel is not a choice, as even the famous ex-gay group Exodus International is finally acknowledging. They recently came out, so to speak, and said that while they still think homosexual activity is not God's plan for humanity, it's ridiculous to think anyone can pray away the gay. Now they are merely helping people to be celibate. Oy.

But in any case, how we feel may not be a choice, but that's also not the point. The point is what we do with how we feel, and that is always and inevitably a choice. And the choices we make about what to do with how we feel – sexually, romantically, and in a hundred other areas of life – are what make us human. This is where I find the greatest humanist insight for Unitarian Universalists: no divine being is about to drop down out of the sky and make our choices for us. Our choices make the world. Both the fact that we must choose, and the specifics of what we choose, turn out to be crucially important for both who we are as individuals and what the world can be as a whole.

As you know, I sort of like Broadway musicals, and I've found some lovely language on the topic of choice-making in a musical called *Children of Eden*, written by Stephen Schwartz. It's a re-telling of the Adam and Eve story and the Noah and the Flood story from the perspective that God is a controlling father who only slowly comes to accept that his children must grow up and leave him. At the end of the show, Noah's family steps out onto dry land and sings about what they have learned. Here's the heart of the song: "Of all the gifts we have received one is most precious and most terrible: the will in each of us is free. It's in our hands. And if someday we hear a voice, if he should speak again, our silent Father, all he will tell us is the choice is in our hands. Our hands can choose to drop the knife. Our hearts can choose to stop the hating. For every moment of our lives is the beginning."

Every moment of our lives is the beginning.

So on Pride Day, it seems most appropriate to talk about love as a choice. Love of self, love of others. Romantic love that you choose to cultivate. The love of heterosexuals for their lesbian, gay, and bisexual friends and family members.

When I was 16 or so, newly out to my family, and pretty angry and miserable over their responses, I would never have believed that whether I loved myself or not could be a choice. It was all I could do to minimize my self-destructiveness and intermittently have a good time, and I'll admit that the piano was a life-saver. But as I've gotten older and seen people who acted with self-love and people who didn't, I've come to think that choice must play some role, even at the most basic level of self-preservation. I know too many gay men who, completely aware of how HIV is spread, nonetheless had unsafe sex and got infected. And I know plenty of gay men who have remained HIV-negative despite having robust sex lives. I know too many sexual minorities who have used drugs or alcohol or food to numb out, and I know plenty who live lives of awakens and presence, whether because they never went down that path in the first place or because they are in recovery from it. Choices of well-being might be damned hard to make, but at least to some degree, they are choices. And when I think about how difficult it used to be to be anything other than straight, and how difficult it still is in many places, I am honestly amazed at how much good self-loving choice-making there is among non-heterosexual folks. We were not taught to love ourselves. Many of us were actually taught to hate ourselves. And here we are, so often acting as though we are worth something, as though we are as good as anyone else, as though we have our own light for the world. What a powerful testimony to who we are and what we choose to do.

One reason to celebrate Pride Day, then, is to honor the many times, ways and places that sexual minorities act in self-love and make the best decisions for ourselves. The world has changed since I was sixteen, both in terms of how many people are open about being lesbian, gay, or bisexual, and in terms of how normalized homosexuality has become in some aspects of popular culture. But we still live in a world with far too many people and organizations and governments that would like nothing more than for us to go away, to become quote-unquote normal, or to just die. In the midst of such vitriol and disgust and disdain, we live our rich lives and cultivate joy and contribute beauty to the world. That's something to be proud of. Very proud.

Then there are all the choices we make to build and sustain our romantic relationships. We don't usually talk about the work of love, perhaps because we live in an adolescent culture where love is too often reduced to the song, "I Can't Fight This Feeling Anymore." But we all know something about what it takes to keep a relationship going and to keep it strong. Making up after you fight. Compromising when you don't want to. Listening when you are too tired to pay good attention, but somehow you do it anyway. All those things you don't say, even when you really want to say them. We've all been there.

In a society where "I Can't Fight This Feeling Anymore" is a cultural marker for love, it's important to remember that the work of love is not about unstoppable feelings, it's about optional choices. All those things you've done to keep your past or present relationship going, all those things were choices. Sometimes difficult choices. And you made them. We made them. We made up after fights. We compromised. We were good listeners. We held our tongues when that was the best option available. We didn't do these things because we had a hunka hunka burning

love. Or at least, not *only* because we had a hunka hunka burning love. We did them because we were dedicated to our relationships, committed to our partners, and we made choices of dedication and commitment.

The work of love holds whether we are in same-sex or opposite-sex relationships, and I know this because I've done that work in both types of relationships. That said, though, there is one way that same-sex romantic relationships are very different from opposite-sex ones, in this and many other cultures, and it comes down to public support for different types of couples. If an opposite-sex couple is struggling, society has all kinds of support for them. In contrast, there's still not much formalized support out there for same-sex couples who need help doing the work of love. If you don't live in a sexually diverse community or have good straight ally friends or have a smart and supportive family of origin, you and your partner might be all alone in trying to build or rebuild your relationship. The work of love becomes even harder. In cases like that, it can be a miracle when couples stay together.

So another reason to celebrate Pride Day is to honor our same-sex romantic relationships and the work we choose to put into them to keep them going. Our relationships are worth celebrating precisely because sometimes they are extra difficult to sustain, and also because, as Unitarian Universalists we affirm that all love is good and that, therefore, all non-exploitative relationships are good. We have pride in ourselves and the good choices we make. We have pride in our relationships, and in the good choices we make as couples.

Ultimately, though, for many of us non-heterosexual people, our ability to love ourselves and our ability to build good same-sex relationships don't come solely from lesbian, gay, or bisexual communities. Sooner or later, for many of us, our heterosexual friends, family members and other allies play a substantial role in enriching our lives. After a rocky start all those years ago, my mother goes to New York's pride parade most years and has a therapy practice in which a surprising number of her patients are lesbians. My father and his wife are openly disappointed when I visit them without Phoebe coming. Most of my closest friends these days are straight, and I play in this fabulous church band with a bunch of straight guys. And playing in the band is a truly valuable experience for me, because who else am I going to talk sports with? Not to mention all those awesome straight allies in the theater world like Daniel Radcliffe, Kristen Chenoweth, and of course Whoopi Goldberg, who was an ally way long before it was cool. I may not know them personally, but knowing that they are rooting for my community puts a little extra joy in my heart. And knowing about all those straight allies out there, and knowing all of you here in this room today, makes me even more committed to wanting to take of myself and my spouse the way I feel taken care of in this community. Not to mention, it makes me want to find ever more useful ways to give back to this community.

Now, there's something worth remembering about being a straight ally, which is that it is undoubtedly and absolutely a choice. Plenty of parents, siblings, and friends have simply rejected the lesbian, gay or bisexual people in their lives, which is why gay teens are much more likely to be homeless and to commit suicide than their straight peers. Acceptance of your gay son, your lesbian sister, your bisexual best friend is not automatic. It's a choice. And sometimes it's a very, very hard choice, especially if you've spent your whole life believing that homosexuality is an abomination before God. Kristen Chenoweth is actually a good public example of such a person,

a very conservative Evangelical Christian until she went to college and became best friends with a gay guy. Now she is a public ally on many fronts, and after reading her autobiography, all I can say is that she makes the choice to be an ally over and over again when it would so often be easier to just not say anything.

Pride Day, then, at least for me, also becomes a day to honor the choices of our straight allies to love and support and celebrate those of us who are not straight. In the Colorado Springs parade, it's a day to watch heterosexual parents, heterosexual churchgoers, heterosexual politicians, heterosexual friends, and all sorts of other heterosexuals lift us up and affirm us. One of my Colorado College acquaintances makes a point of bringing her children to the parade every year so that the message that diversity is something to celebrate is part of her kids' entire lives, from birth on. Don't get me wrong – I love to see the actual lesbian, gay, bisexual, and trans people in the parade and the park. But I love the idea that it's a day for all of us even if it is primarily a day about some of us. I want to live in a world where our differences may define us in part but they don't define us entirely, and where we appreciate living with those who are different from us.

Yes, it's a choice. All the most important things about what it means to be lesbian, gay or bisexual are choices. We choose to love ourselves, and we'd better choose to do so if we want to live with joy and give back to the world. We choose to love our partners, putting in the hard work that allows us to reap the benefits of love long celebrated. And we are grateful for the choices of our straight allies to be in our lives, supporting us, laughing and crying with us, and reminding us about the world so many of us want to create over time, where we are all good allies to each other. Amen, blessed be, and happy Pride Day, everyone!